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Gertrude Bonnin Zitkala-Ša

Biography

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird), was an extraordinarily talented and educated Native American woman who struggled and triumphed in a time when severe prejudice prevailed toward Native American culture and women. Her talents and contributions in the worlds of literature, music, and politics challenge long-standing beliefs that the white man's culture is good, and Native Americans are sinful savages. Bonnin aimed at creating understanding between the dominant white and Native American cultures. As a woman of mixed white and Native American ancestry, she embodied the need for the two cultures to live cooperatively within the same body of land. Her works criticized dogma, and her life as a Native American woman was dedicated against the evils of oppression.

Bonnin was born in 1876, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Her father was a white man named Felker, about who little is known. Her mother was Ellen Tate Iyohinwin (She Reaches for the Wind) Simmons, a full-blooded Sioux. Bonnin was Simmons' third child. At only eight years of age, Bonnin decided to leave her mother and the reservation to attend White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. This was a school funded by the Quakers. After four years, she returned home but then enrolled, against her mother's wishes, at the Santee Normal Training School. She chose this school because it was close to her mother. In 1895, she decided to move on and accepted entrance to and scholarships from Earlham College in Indiana.



Quick Facts

- * 1876-1938
- * Adopted the name Zitkala-Ša
- * Published autobiographical stories in *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly*

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Though most noted for her literary and political genius, Bonnin was also an accomplished violinist and even won a scholarship to study at the Boston Conservatory of Music. In 1913, she and classical music composer William Hanson wrote an opera called *Sun Dance*. The creation was appreciated by a few Native Americans but, since 1937, has gone unnoticed. Neither before nor since has there been an opera written by a Native American. Music was Bonnin's real love, yet she felt it more important to fight for the rights of her people through literature and politics.

After her studies at the Boston Conservatory, Bonnin accepted a teaching position at the Carlisle Indian School. The school was founded by Richard Henry Pratt, an army officer who saw education as a means to move "from savagery to civilization" and believed that "We must kill the savage to save the man." Pratt abusively exploited the students for labor while at the same time receiving government funds for each student attending the school. Bonnin's stay at Carlisle Indian School lasted two years.

As a writer, she adopted the pen name "Zitkala-Ša" and in 1900 began publishing articles criticizing the Carlisle Indian School. She resented the degradation the students were subjected to, from forced Christianity to severe punishment for speaking in native languages. She was criticized for this at the time because many felt she showed no gratitude for the kindness and support that white people had given her in her education.

Bonnin had two marriage proposals in her life. The first was made by Carlos Montzuma, a Yavapai activist and physician. She broke this engagement off because her own plans for her life extended beyond his hopes for her to be his helper and mother of his children. The second proposal, which she accepted, was from Captain Raymond Bonnin. He was a mixed blood Nakota living on the reservation and working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Unfortunately, the marriage did indeed prove detrimental to her career as she was forced to follow her husband as his career took him from reservation to reservation. The Bonnins had one son named Ohiya (Winner).

On a reservation in Utah, the Bonnins became part of the Society of American Indians, of which she was elected secretary in 1916. The Bonnins then moved to Washington, D.C., where Gertrude continued her work with the Society and began editing the *American Indian Magazine*.



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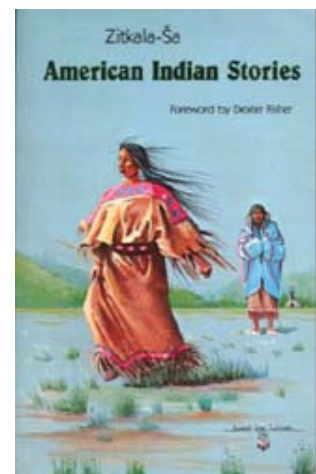
Biography continued

A strong political voice for Native Americans, Bonnin wrote *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft, Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes, Legalized Robbery*. This work, published in 1924, with two white co-authors, exposed the robberies and murders in Oklahoma of Native American people and led to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, reestablishing a trust for Indian lands. Bonnin was also pivotal in gaining the rights of citizenship and the vote for Native Americans. She did this by seeking unity between all tribes in a pan-Indian political power. Thus began the National Counsel of American Indians in 1926.

Bonnin died in 1938. She is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Her tombstone is marked "Zitkala-Sa of the Sioux Nation," and is also inscribed with a picture of a tepee. Ironically, the burial honor was due not to her great contributions to the U.S. , but because of her husband's position as an army captain.

Of her literary works, Bonnin's "Why I Am a Pagan" perhaps best explains her religious beliefs. It was first published in the Atlantic in December of 1902, a time in which society was accustomed to and expectant of Native American essays about conformations to Christianity. Coupled with a chapter - "The Big Red Apples" - from *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, the essay makes a case against traditional and religious Christianity. The two works are fascinating, and the dynamic they form expresses the indignations suffered by the Native Americans at the hands of Christians.

Bonnin was ardently against the oppression of Native Americans in Western culture, though she saw it as an intimate part of the language of the "pale-faces." Bonnin cleverly alludes to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve's fall as a metaphor for the seduction of the Native Americans by whites in "The Big Red Apples." Eve was seduced by the snake because of her ambition for knowledge. Bonnin created a parallel to her own childhood experience of the "pale-faces" from the East coming to her reservation looking for Indian children to recruit for their school. The men from the East seductively promised "Yes, little girl, the nice red apples are for those who pick them" in the East (Lauter 928). So against her mother's wishes, Bonnin ate from the forbidden tree and headed east.





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Bonnin's masterful use of language and her grasp on Western allusions add to the effectiveness of her writing. Like many other minority writers, she learned about the culture oppressing her and developed writing techniques so her voice could be at least heard and hopefully understood by the dominant culture. Had Bonnin used allusions to Native American stories and her native language, she would have not affected her target audience, the oppressive "pale-faces." Bonnin's "The Big Red Apples" causes white readers to re-think traditional Christian conquests by suggesting that the Indian was corrupted by the dominant culture. "Why I Am a Pagan" further challenges a reverent and religious Christian to see the beauty of Indian beliefs, their love of nature, appreciation of the wonder for the universe, and acceptance of all (even the "pale-face") as being part of God's creation. The image of a God-fearing, accepting, and loving being is a sharp contrast to the image of a savage warrior.

In "Why I am a Pagan," Bonnin worships a God that created the beauty in the world and a religion that embraces "a kinship to any and all parts of this vast universe" (Lauter 938). Bonnin contrasts this with the Christianity to which her cousin subscribed that "taught me (him) also the folly of our old beliefs" (Lauter 939). She argues that God did not call the white man to destroy a beautiful Native American culture, steal their homelands, pen them up on reservations, or beat Indian children for speaking in their mother tongue. Though she resented this mistreatment, Bonnin still aimed at bridging a gap between the vast differences of the dominant white and Native American cultures. She did not let herself be seduced into believing that her Native American traditions were folly or sin. As a person of mixed blood, her life could be looked upon as an example of the beauty and accomplishments that can be made when the two cultures can live cooperatively. Bonnin realized that to hate difference was to hate life; Bonnin was a lover of life. Perhaps it is time that the U.S. had a national cemetery to honor those like Bonnin who sought peace and loved life, rather than hailed those adept at killing it.



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